

Cape Developer's School Hall Project Delivers on the Dreams.

Garden Cities' Archway Foundation gains momentum - and support

'Sometimes I think it's just been a dream and then I see the school hall, and know it's real. I didn't ever expect this much.' The dream has been uppermost in the mind of Kraaifontein principal, Mrs Alice Tomose Shabangu whose school in Wallacedene is one of three that will have brand new halls handed over this month (December 2009).

The halls are among the 31 that have been presented to Western Cape schools in the past six years, but represent only a dent in the more than 700 that still have to be provided. But for John Matthews, CEO of 90-year-old housing developer Garden Cities, and his board of directors, a personal dream is also slowly coming true. The company's efforts to reduce the school hall backlog in disadvantaged communities of the region are bearing fruit.

Starting entirely unaided, with halls that could be built from 30 per cent of the company's annual after tax profit, the initiative, named the Archway Foundation, has now drawn the attention of powerful partners, and the prospect of waiting more than a century for a hall has eased a little for the schoolchildren of the Western Cape. Joint venture partners on specific projects now include the Garden Route Casino, the Mellon Housing Trust, the Vodacom Foundation and the Western Cape Education Department (WCED). But, says Matthews, many more are needed.

In the beginning, the foundation, established six years ago by the board of Garden Cities shortly after Matthews' took up his appointment as CEO, identified schools where the need was greatest, and began to build the halls. His own schooldays on the Cape Flats were a strong motivator in Matthews' determination to make the Archway Foundation and its gigantic task work, and he realised that

help was needed. The foundation's efforts were appreciated by the Western Cape Education Department and Province funds have been made available to help finance some of the halls in joint ventures with the Archway Foundation which has the expertise and infrastructure to deliver each of the halls in around two months.

'We have been involved in a total of 31 projects so far, of which nine have been funded by ourselves, four as private joint ventures with other corporates, and 18 in collaboration with the WCED, whose members we gratefully acknowledge for their participation in this huge project,' says Matthews. The halls are to be found all over the province including Knysna, Mossel Bay, Mitchells Plain, Hanover Park, Kensington and Saldanha Bay.

So far, R42m has been allocated by the Archway Foundation and, jointly, a total of R84.5m has been spent. 'We are well aware of the shrinking fiscus and so we call on other corporates to discuss a joint venture. While we may have only built 31 out of the 736, an opening of one of these halls graphically demonstrates the positive impact on the children and the community.'

This impact is endorsed by the principals of the schools that receive new halls this month. Cliffie Vraagom, headmaster of the Diazville Secondary School in Saldanha Bay, says the 26-year-old school has been given a new sense of purpose by the R3.5 million hall. The spirit is strong among the young high-achievers at the school that include a SA Junior Kickboxing champion and the winners of three international Science expos over the past five years.

'In spite of not having a practice venue, we have a highly talented brass band that is in constant demand, a wonderful school choir and three drama groups. The hall will enrich the lives of these children alone, and encourage others to participate in the additional activities that the hall will provide space for,' he said.

Vraagom has been principal for five years and a teacher at the school since 1986. He has a staff of 39 teachers and the school is attended

by 1 100 children.

Alice Tomose Shabangu is serving her second year as principal of the Enkululukweni Primary School in Wallacedene, Kraaifontein, following 12 years in the deputy position. She says the R3.5 million hall at her school, which was funded equally by the Archway Foundation and the Mellon Housing Trust, provides a great deal more than a place to gather and perform, or play sport. It is both inspirational and a source of income for the school, whose children cannot afford to pay fees. It will be hired to the community and fund raising events will be held there. 'The kids will not have to roam the streets, there will be a safe place for them until their parents return from work to look after them. And of course the gardens and vegetable beds that the Mellon Trust has provided add to the value and quality of their life.' A soccer field has also been laid out and grassed for the school. 'The children are so excited, this is life-changing for them,' she says.

Estienne Rheinicke is the principal of De Heide Primary School in Recreation Street, Bredasdorp, which grew from an amalgamation of two schools 26 years ago. He has 1 448 children at the school and 42 teachers. De Heide has a 686 square metre hall that was funded jointly by the Archway and the WCED and Rheinicke says already it has raised the status of the school, which, for the first time will host its own eisteddfod next year. And dramatic presentations including the ambitious Charlie's Circus operetta in which 200 children will participate, will be staged there. Karate and kickboxing will find a home in the hall, and he says the return of physical education (PT) to the curriculum next year presents no problems - just opportunities provided by the new school hall.

'The school halls go beyond the provision of classrooms and teachers for kids in Western Cape schools, they give the kids a sense of pride in their school and in themselves - and a reason to achieve. When you see how they react to the new building, the light in their eyes, you realise just how much they deserve this and how vital it is to provide them with that inspiration,' says Matthews.

